

American Indian Internet Cigarette Sales: Another Avenue for Selling Tobacco Products

Felicia S. Hodge, DrPH, Betty A. Geishirt Cantrell, MSSW, MBA, Roxanne Struthers, PhD, and John Casken, PhD

A study conducted by the University of Minnesota found that cigarettes can be purchased on American Indian-owned Internet sites for about one fifth of the price at grocery stores, making this a more convenient, lower-priced, and appealing method of purchasing cigarettes. Researchers and educators are challenged to address this new marketing ploy and to discover ways to curb rising smoking rates in American Indian communities.

The changing landscape of cigarette advertising, sales, and points of purchase in American Indian communities has gone largely unnoticed. Few studies have examined Internet cigarette sales,¹⁻³ and even fewer have examined the marketing tools utilized by American Indian cigarette sales entrepreneurs. Cigarettes sales are shifting from smoke shops⁴ and small-town markets to easily accessible and colorful Internet Web sites. This shift marks 3 significant outcomes: (1) access to cigarette and tobacco products has been made more convenient and lower priced; (2) Native-brand cigarettes are colorful, attractive, eye-catching, and appealing to ethnic pride; and (3) cigarette sales are a sizeable source of income for some tribes and American Indian entrepreneurs.

METHODS

A 2001–2002 study conducted by the University of Minnesota Cancer Center sought to obtain much-needed information on tribal tobacco policies, cultural practices, and environmental/media influences among American Indians residing on 7 reservations (4 Sioux and 3 Ojibwe reservations) in the states of Minnesota, Nebraska, and South

Dakota. Focus groups, key interviews, and observational methods were employed. A computerized Internet search engine (<http://www.google.com>) was used to identify Web sites that sell cigarettes or other tobacco products on-line. The results of the Internet search are presented in this article.

RESULTS

Over 1000 Web sites were searched, producing 52 Web sites identified under “American Indian cigarettes.” Of these, 77% were American Indian owned and 77% were located on American Indian tribal land. The majority (60% of the total number of Web sites and 78% of American Indian-owned Web sites) are based in the state of New York. Two are based in New Mexico, and 1 each is based in Nebraska and Oklahoma. Five are identified as located in “sovereign Indian territory” with no specific state named. The Nebraska Web site is owned by an American Indian tribe. The New York Web sites belong to individuals, not tribes, selling cigarettes that are shipped from tribal land sans the sales and excise taxes.

Fifteen of the 52 Web sites did not sell tobacco products directly. Eight were gateways that linked to another Web site selling tobacco products, and 1 was linked to 5 other Web sites and was accessed via at least 6 different domain names. Five gateway Web sites listed 5, 11, 40, 53, or 172 other Web sites that sell tobacco products but did not sell the products themselves. Two American Indian-brand cigarette-manufacturing companies, Smokin Joe and Seneca Cayuga, were found to have their own Web sites. Cigarettes are not actually sold by those sites; rather, buyers are directed to recommended points of purchase.

All Web sites were found to be easily accessible and to provide convenient purchasing and privacy mailing. Although age restrictions apply to 81% of the sites, no proof of age was required. One only needs to click the icon that says, “I am over 18 (or 21) years of age” to purchase cigarettes. Additionally, only half of the sites post the US surgeon general’s warning on the harmful effects of tobacco.

A wide range of inexpensive cigarette prices were found at these Web sites. For ex-



FIGURE 1— American Indian cigarette and tobacco product packaging.

ample, Camel cigarettes can be purchased for as low as \$24.50 per carton on-line whereas they cost almost twice as much in the grocery store (\$46.99). One major brand of cigarettes (Doral) can be purchased for as little as \$18 per carton on-line.

At least 8 American Indian cigarette and tobacco product brands (Figure 1) are sold on 33 Web sites. State sales and excise taxes are not added to the sales of these brands, making their sales an appealing and profitable endeavor. They include brands like Native, Omaha, Smokin Joes, Rogers, Lewiston, and Seneca. “Native”-brand cigarettes can be purchased on the Internet for a low price of \$9.95 per carton; about one fifth the cost of cigarettes purchased in a grocery store (Table 1).

The convenience of purchasing inexpensive cigarettes on the Internet is further enhanced by the anonymity of receiving brown paper-wrapped cigarette cartons in the mail. Orders can be placed on-line, by telephone, or by faxing or mailing in an order form. Payment options vary and include credit card, check, money order, or even COD. The sales are by carton only; shipping costs vary from Web site to Web site. Typically, a purchase of several cartons provides free same-day shipping.

DISCUSSION

Purchasing American Indian-brand cigarettes is attractive and compelling to those addicted to nicotine and provides the ability to circumvent the high price of cigarettes. The sale of cigarettes on-line generates millions of dollars of income for tribal entities and individual owners of Web sites. This presents an ethical dilemma: income is in direct conflict

TABLE 1—Cigarette Pricing, Major and Indian Brands: Summer, 2002

	Web Site, \$	Wholesale Club, \$ ^a	Grocery Store, \$ ^a
Major Brand			
Doral	18.00–29.95		
Marlboro	26.00–36.85	35.69	46.99
Basic	20.49–33.30	33.39	43.00
More	28.75–36.85	46.99	
Camel	24.50–36.85	35.69	46.99
Indian Brand			
Native	9.95–14.60		
Omaha	10.99–13.99		
Seneca	9.99–15.50		
Smokin Joes	10.25–17.90		
Rogers	11.05–15.99		
Lewiston	9.99–17.90		
American Spirit	27.00–35.00		
Redman Chew	18.99–30.00		

^aPricing occurred in the San Francisco East Bay Area in California.

with the impact of cigarette smoking on the health status of American Indian communities. The changing pattern of smoking sales and new points of purchase challenge researchers and educators to address this new marketing ploy and to discover ways to curb rising smoking rates in Indian communities. ■

About the Authors

Felicia S. Hodge is with the Center for American Indian Research and Education and the School of Nursing, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Roxanne Struthers is with the University of Minnesota, School of Nursing. Betty A. Geishirt Cantrell is with the Center for American Indian Research and Education, University of Minnesota. John Casken is with the University of Hawaii, School of Nursing, Honolulu.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Felicia S. Hodge, DrPH, University of Minnesota Center for American Indian Research and Education, 6–101 Weaver-Densford Hall, 308 Harvard St SE, Minneapolis MN 55455 (e-mail: hodge029@umn.edu).

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Contributors

F.S. Hodge, B.A. Geishirt Cantrell, and R. Struthers were involved in the project planning, implementation, analyses, and evaluation, and writing this brief. J. Casken was involved in the analyses and evaluation of the project and writing this brief.

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Human Participant Protection

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